THE HINDU
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magazine

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ILLUSTRATION: HITESH SONAR

CHASING FIRE, FACING REALITY

An early exit from the workforce as hyped by the 'Financial Independence, Retire Early' movement may elude many in India but there are lessons to help craft a life of choice. Some money experts and FIREers weigh in

Pooja Salvi

Last month, Ravi and Neha Handa, along with their son, spent over a week in Singapore on their Diwali vacation. The family stayed in swanky hotels, one of them especially known for its underwater bedrooms overlooking 40,000 marine creatures. It was not the first of such holidays. For the couple, money woes flew out of the window in 2022, when they retired with a fat corpus. Today, they have approximately ₹15 crore invested in real estate, mutual funds, stocks, cryptocurrency, national pension scheme (NPS), personal provident fund, and sovereign gold bonds.

In March 2021, Ravi sold his startup 'Handa ka Funda', a CAT and MBA e-learning site, which he founded in 2013, to the edtech company Unacademy for an undisclosed amount. This allowed the two, then in their late 30s, to achieve financial independence and retire early (FIRE) in 2022.

Among Indians, there is a rapidly growing interest in FIRE. Many wish to exit the workforce to gain early financial freedom and control over their life choices. Ravi, now 42, has achieved that.

The FIRE movement has been grabbing headlines and social media interest this year. In India, the conversation is picking up pace, with several podcasts and video interviews on the topic. The sub-Reddit FIRE_Ind has nearly 65,000 members and around 46,000 weekly visitors. Here, one can share anecdotes about their journey towards financial independence and seek advice from 'FIREd' individuals such as Ravi. But experts say ground realities are starkly different from online projections. As the year nears its end, we take stock of the situation: young India is eager to FIRE, but can they afford to do so?

A western import

Lavanya Mohan, chartered accountant and author of *Money Doesn't Grow on Trees* (2025), a personal finance guide, explains the idea migrated across the ocean. "[FIRE] is a cultural movement in the West, especially among millennials who lived through the 2008 crash and watched job security evaporate. For many of them, the goal wasn't to stop working, it was to stop depending on work. The concept spread from Silicon Valley engineers and personal finance blogs to everyday professionals who wanted 'time freedom' and [a release from] the rat race," she says.

A 2024 nationwide survey from Grant Thornton Bharat LLP titled 'India's pension landscape: A study on retirement reality and readiness' found a growing desire among young Indians for early retirement: 43% in the under-25 group studied hoped to retire before the age of 55. The age group prioritised work-life balance and leisure over extended career spans.

FIRE, however, is vastly different from Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS). "VRS happens when your employer offers you a package to leave early – it's reactive. FIRE is proactive – something you architect for yourself, often years in advance, through saving and investing aggressively," adds Mohan. "One is born out of redundancy; the other out of design."

Save, invest, live (frugally), repeat

To achieve FIRE, the first tip offered is obvious: live below your means. Mumbai-based mechanical engineer James Fernandes has been living a "frugal" life since COVID-19. The pandemic-triggered spike in health expenses and job-market insecurities made him reconsider his priorities. He implemented a strict saving and investing routine: no online shopping, no eating out, limited social outings, and swapping trains for flights. "Budgeting is important. It doesn't mean not spending at all but knowing what one spends on," says the 41-year-old, who hopes to retire in the next four years.

On track Ravi and Neha Handa
(SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

For Noida-based Jayant Kumar, 45, "the priority was always to invest before spending". Kumar managed to reach his FIRE number – 35 times his annual expenses, with separate buckets for children's education and marriage – by the end of 2023 and quit working full-time in October 2024. He says, "I started investing aggressively in 2015 and by 2020, I was saving more than 60% of my income. Compounding did a great job of adding wealth to my investments." The former IT professional, whose focus now is family and health, adds, "Saving small amounts might seem insignificant, but can yield multifold returns in the long run. Even with rent and EMIs, one should save 10%-20% of their salary consistently."

As the idea travelled continents, FIRE aspirants have been chasing borrowed numbers and percentages, which experts say spread more misinformation. According to Google search results, to achieve FIRE, one must save and invest aggressively – often 50%-75% of their income – to build a corpus that is roughly 25 times their annual expenses. This enables them to maintain a safe withdrawal rate of 4% post-retirement. Does this apply to Indian realities? "Those figures come from the U.S., where inflation hovers around 2%-3% and markets behave differently. In India, the maths is far less forgiving," explains Chennai-based Mohan. "Inflation is higher, returns are volatile, and family obligations rarely shrink with age. Saving 75% of your income is hard enough in California. In Indian metro cities, it's near-impossible." One should also be wary of the famous "4% rule", she warns. "It collapses when your post-retirement medical and lifestyle costs grow faster than your investments."

TYPES OF FIRE

Coast FIRE
Build enough early so you can slow down later, and let the investments compound

Lean FIRE
Saving and investing aggressively for a retirement with a modest lifestyle and a frugal, minimalistic budget

Fat FIRE
Retiring with a big cushion to live a big life

Barista FIRE
Save enough in investments to partially cover expenses and work part-time for benefits

Young people want shortcuts to make a lot of money quickly. In my experience, this is a sure way to lose a lot of money and peace of mind

MONIKA HALAN
Personal finance expert and author of *Let's Talk Money*

Pensions actuary Palak Chauhan, Fellow of the Institute of Actuaries of India, who has worked as a global employee benefits advisor for Nestlé, Citigroup, General Motors and General Electric, says it doesn't add up in the Indian context. "People think personal finance is as simple as putting everything in a formula. It's not. One needs to consider assumptions that are relevant to each economy. And 25 times of one's annual expenses is irrelevant to India. A more realistic estimate of the right expense number comes to around 30-33 times."

She goes a step further to add that in a country as vast as India, there are too many variables at play that make it very difficult to zero in on a particular percentage; numbers floating online aren't etched in stone. Monika Halan, personal finance expert and author of *Let's Talk Money: You've Worked Hard for It, Now Make It Work for You* (2018), says each life is different. "You need to take professional help to do retirement planning."

A pipe dream?

Mohan offers a grounded perspective. "FIRE assumes you can save half or more of your income. That's a luxury when you're juggling EMIs, caregiving, and inflation that won't quit. DINK (double income, no kids) couples and high-income professionals may manage it, but for most middle-class Indians, the real dream is to retire with dignity, not early," she says.

For Mumbai-based customer-service employee Eeshan (*name changed on request*), 28, saving 75% is far-fetched when making ends meet is a priority. "Living alone on rent, managing all expenses without any financial support, makes the idea of early retirement feel impossible," he says. "After paying rent, EMIs, bills, and other necessary expenses, I make it a point to set aside a small amount each month – I can manage 5% in SIPs. With the expenses ever increasing and salaries not matching them, it seems impossible to get out of this cycle," he adds. It, thus, appears that only a certain section can afford to achieve FIRE – the high-net-worth individuals (HNIs) and ultra-HNIs.

CONTINUED ON » PAGE 4

SHORTLISTED FOR THE BOOKER PRIZE 2025

GETTY IMAGES

STAGED REALITY

In her unsettling new novel, Katie Kitamura blurs performance and truth, leading to a compelling exploration of relationships and identity

Mini Kapoor

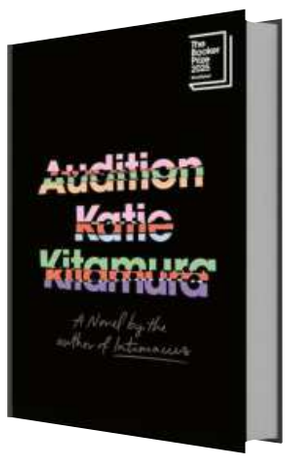
Katie Kitamura's new, and Booker Prize-shortlisted, novel *Audition* is a puzzle made of many parts. The unnamed narrator, a 49-year-old actress of considerable experience, arrives for a lunch appointment at a busy restaurant in New York City's financial district. That she's edgy is established right away, as she checks the name to confirm it's the correct venue, and having done so, weighs the impulse to turn around and leave.

But she is a stage performer, and is wired to respond to cues. So when a departing guest holds open the door for her, she steps in. Once inside, as the host guides her towards the table where she has a reservation to meet her lunch companion, Xavier, a 20-something man of "natural charm" and "charisma", she again hushes the temptation to flee, heeding "the imperative of mere courtesy".

It is not immediately clear what is the nature of their relationship, which is evidently very recently formed. Even as they talk hesitantly, a background track plays in her mind. How may this meeting, an older woman and a young man, appear to the restaurant staff, to fellow diners, to an indeterminate observer? This heightened sensitivity to the observer's perspective soon acquires a more tangible edge when she sees her husband Tomas enter the restaurant.

Her mind whirs more rapidly now, betraying an unexplained fear of being both exposed and let down. Tomas had said he'd be home the entire day working, so what is he doing here? What would she, in turn, say to him should he spot them? Perhaps she could introduce Xavier as a drama student, "which he was", and ask Tomas to join them.

> **Kitamura writes,** "There are always two stories taking place at once, the narrative inside the play and the narrative around it, and the boundary between the two is more porous than you might think, that is both the danger and the excitement of the performance."



Audition
Katie Kitamura
Fern Press
₹999

Rehearsing life

It's just a few pages, but Kitamura has set the tone for the entire novel – the odd disjunction between the narrator's disquiet over the behaviour of others (Tomas, Xavier, her colleagues at the theatre) and her own modes of communication (by words, action, gesture), all of it with an awareness of how it may appear to someone looking on.

It transpires that Xavier had met her recently to suggest that he was the child she had spoken of having given up in a press interview. There is a remarkable resemblance, he tells her. But she tells us, the readers, that the journalist had in fact been evasive while reporting what was an abortion.

All the elements in her current circumstances seep into each other – her unfolding acquaintance with Xavier, her married life with Tomas and, importantly it would seem, the difficult stretch in the role she's rehearsing. The playwright has left it to her to find a way to negotiate a narrative break halfway through the play, a transition between "not two versions of the same character, but two different characters altogether".

Unravelling minds

Soon after, Kitamura makes a transition too. Halfway through the novel, we are delivered to a reconfigured family scene. Here, the narrator, her husband Tomas and son Xavier are celebrating the "extraordinary success" of a play, which hinged on her ability on stage to make the "transition from the first half of the play into the second".

At first this appears to be a sequel, however abrupt, to the first part of the novel, this inclusion of Xavier in the family circle. But when the narrator dwells on her "memory of [Xavier's] room in his adolescent years", the narrative divide becomes clear. Here on, there is an ever sharper sense of foreboding that the narrator's world is just a step away from unravelling.

The specifics of the plot in the two parts and the biographies of key characters do not reconcile: Xavier's status, the marital infidelity of the narrator in the first half and of Tomas in the other. It could be that the essence of the story lies in a delicate overlay of the two parts.

Early in *Audition*, Kitamura writes, "There are always two stories taking place at once, the narrative inside the play and the narrative around it, and the boundary between the two is more porous than you might think, that is both the danger and the excitement of the performance."

It could be that she is asking us to reference the two parts to get a grip on the uncertainness of intimate relationships and creative work. One part may be the 'true' version, and the other 'imagined' – or perhaps both bear elements of truth and imagination. To enquire is to be unsettled. As it was in Kitamura's 2021 novel, *Intimacies*.

The reviewer is a Delhi-based journalist and critic.

Scan the QR code to read about all of the Booker-nominated novels on **magazine.thehindu.com**

The remains of parenthood

Author Ben Markovits paints an inward-looking picture of family life and the toll it takes on individuals

Nandini Bhatia

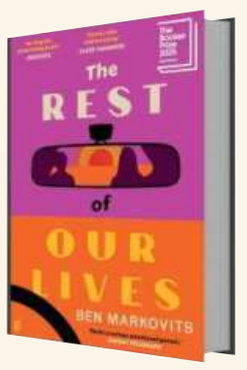
'What's left when your kids grow up and leave home?' Ben Markovits's new novel, *The Rest of Our Lives*, shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize, asks this fundamental question – a question that haunts most parents. Tom Layward, although the narrator, is introduced to us in third person: as the subject of a conversation between his in-laws and as an irregular participant in their summer home dedicated to get-togethers and vacations.

Tom has always felt distanced from his wife Amy's extravagant family culture and even more so since she cheated on him over a decade ago. Their youngest, Miri, is leaving for college and the eldest, Michael, joins them for what feels like a final family gathering to Tom – "we had three days left of family life". The last three days of the 12 years he had stayed in a failing marriage for the sake of the children, who unfortunately, did not remain unscathed in this quiet family scandal. The rest of the novel explores why or whether this finality is necessary or not.

"I wanted to write something about a certain period of family life coming to an end," Markovits told the Booker Prize team in an interview, and Tom's life reflects this aspiration. Tom drops Miri off in her dorm and instead of turning around and returning home, he keeps driving, unsure of where he wishes to reach. To the world, it looks like he is escaping from the strained if not entirely broken relationship he has with his wife, finally free from the obligations of active parenting, but on the inside, he carries this chaos with himself on the road and tries to sort through the mess that his career, his married life and his health have been, of late.

Too much emotional baggage

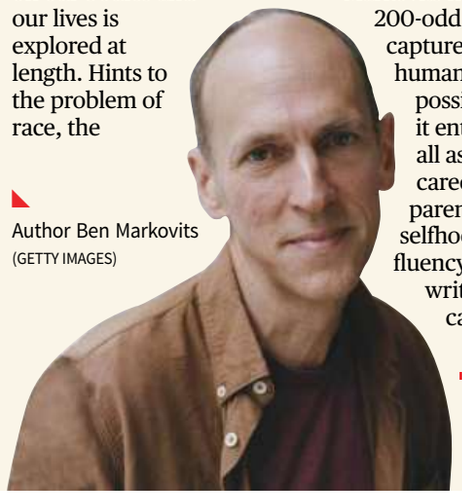
The Rest of Our Lives is not a typical road trip novel. Rather, the journey is more inward than through a landscape, of which we see very little except for the people these places bring him – strangers in a bar inviting Tom for a birthday party, another stranger he plays some basketball with in a park, old college friends, his younger brother, an ex-girlfriend, his partly emotionally estranged son, and a visit to his father's grave. A journey of self-exploration, switching off from the world, with the destination unknown.



The Rest of Our Lives
Ben Markovits
Faber and Faber
₹599

Markovits draws many parallels – between Tom's childhood as an elder sibling protecting his brother in the aftermath of being left by their father and Michael's withdrawal from the Layward family as he senses how the affair nearly broke his parents' marriage. Not only that, Tom borrows much from Markovits's own life: children leaving for college, his expertise in basketball, and worrying symptoms – changes in the middle-aged body – that are often hard to diagnose and hence, ignored by doctors as simply signs of ageing.

Health anxiety and the invisible mark of COVID-19 on our bodies and relationships in our lives is explored at length. Hints to the problem of race, the complicated misinterpretation of hate crime – in and outside the law class Tom teaches – and many such social realities can be found in the novel. But the central plot point remains the marriage that is falling apart and the "undigested emotional material" it has left Tom with.



Author Ben Markovits
(GETTY IMAGES)

Essence of life

One is reminded of the English butler Stevens from Kazuo Ishiguro's 1989 novel, *The Remains of the Day*, and his inability to engage in casual conversation, the failed romance of the past, and the soft spot he had for his previous master, Lord Darlington, who misunderstood the Nazi vision of Germany. Tom thinks much more than he lets on, wonders what his life could have been like if he hadn't broken up with his ex-girlfriend, unintentionally sides with the perpetrators of a problematic case, the white men of America who feel discriminated against, and risks being 'cancelled' at the hands of his students.

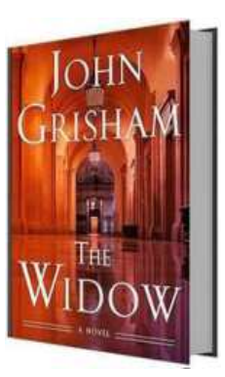
Even though narrative simplicity adds to the relatability of Markovits's novel, some complexity is expected of a writer who has penned a dozen novels, especially in segues to the past. Statements like: "He doesn't really figure in my life these days but I'm going to talk about him anyway" or "I mention this stuff because it shaped our relationship" or "So these are some of the things we talked about," do not suit a seasoned writer.

Nonetheless, it is only after you turn the last page that you realise what Markovits has achieved in 200-odd pages: he captures the essence of human life and the possibility of atrophy it entails, in almost all aspects of life – career, marriage, parenthood and selfhood itself – with a fluency only a few writers are capable of.

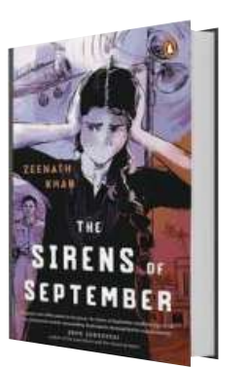
The reviewer is a features writer.

BROWSER

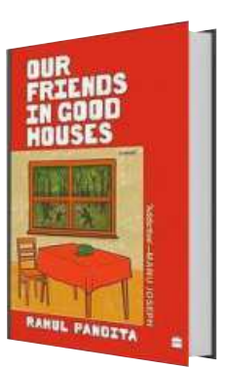
The Widow
John Grisham
Hodder & Stoughton
₹699
The master of courtroom dramas is out with his first-ever mystery, about a small-time lawyer who has just found the richest client of his career, only to find himself accused of murder. A movie adaptation of Grisham's 1997 novel, *The Partner*, starring Tom Holland is reportedly in production.



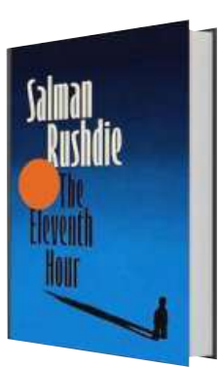
The Sirens of September
Zeenath Khan
Penguin
₹599
In this debut, the author crafts a historical novel of Hyderabad in 1948. As the city veers on the brink of collapse, Farishteh Ali Khan, an aristocratic teenager, finds herself caught in a web of espionage, dark secrets and shifting loyalties.



Our Friends in Good Houses
Rahul Pandita
Fourth Estate India
₹599
A war correspondent more at home in conflict than calm, searches for belonging across continents and fleeting loves in this debut fiction by Pandita, known for his war-zone coverage from Iraq, Sri Lanka and parts of India's Northeast.



The Eleventh Hour
Salman Rushdie
Hamish Hamilton
₹899
In five masterful stories that move between India, England and America, Rushdie reflects on mortality, memory and identity. Quarrelling old men in Chennai, a haunted scholar in England, and a magical musician in Bombay all confront the twilight of their lives.



The memoirs of tennis champions Boris Becker and Björn Borg are also cautionary tales of lives blighted by alcohol, drugs, sex, and in Becker's case, prison

ROLLERCOASTER RIDE

(L-R) Boris Becker and Björn Borg at a tournament in Monaco in April 1988. (GETTY IMAGES)

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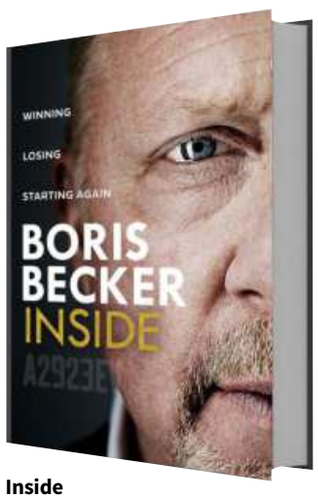
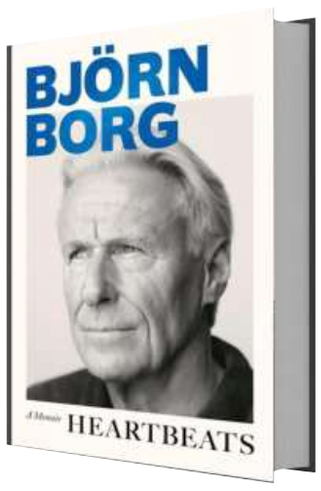


Inside
Boris Becker
HarperCollins
₹699



Heartbeats: A Memoir
Björn Borg; as told to Patricia Borg, trs Bradley Harmon
Hachette India
₹799

Years ago, there was a book that had a series of Björn Borg mugshots on the cover. The captions said: Joy, Anger, Disappointment, Satisfaction, and so on. The joke was that these were all the same picture. Borg was undemonstrative, even unemotional. Behind the mask was another mask, and behind that yet another. It would have been impossible to get a similar jokey cover of Boris Becker who seemed unable to sit still for long enough to get photographed.

"People have always said I didn't show much emotion," Borg writes in his memoir *Heartbeats*, "but inside it was a rollercoaster." *Heartbeats* is the story of Borg twice removed – written by his third wife Patricia, and translated from the Swedish by Bradley Harmon.

That doesn't diminish the impact, for it follows the George Orwell rule: ("Autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful.") For example, here's the man, who, after deciding Patricia was his soulmate flies back to a girlfriend he had broken up with "to know if there was anything left between us".

The maturing of Becker

Boris Becker's *Inside*, ghosted by tennis writer Tom Fordyce, by contrast, is well written. It is the story of his days in prison following insolvency. The theme of losing control pervades both accounts, the prison story being as much an indictment of the British penal system. It is harrowing, even startling in parts, and the maturing of an unformed mind (Becker was already in his 50s then) is drawn out skilfully and unsentimentally.

"I really relate to Boris," writes Borg, "He's made a lot of bad decisions and business deals. There aren't too many who can truly understand what we've experienced."

"I love Borg," Becker writes, "but I've seen what happened to him afterwards, and I don't want that to happen to me."

Borg won his first Davis Cup match at 16, Becker was Wimbledon champion at 17. BB1 and BB2 – as Becker referred to them – both great tennis champions, became cautionary tales, their lives blighted by alcohol, drugs, sex and in Becker's case, prison. Borg retired at 25, Becker contemplated retirement at 23.

Dangers of extremes

Tennis is an individual sport, and in their time the two BBs were each head of a corporate of one, having to handle the business, the psychology, the training, the travel, the relationships, the tournaments mostly on their own.

Today's stars have whole teams, leaving them free to focus on the game. The temptations are the same, the choices they have to make are similar, the hazards remain, especially after early success. But they are better advised, and they have the examples of Borg and Becker to understand the dangers of extremes.

In *Heartbeats*, Borg rips off some of the masks. What emerges is a man of superstition and astrology, who confesses to what he calls gently, "overlapping relations", whose intense discipline and focus on the tennis court was matched by their absence outside it. When there was no joy left in the game, he quit. "How can you quit tennis even before turning twenty-six?" he asks, in retrospective incredulity.

How did talent converted into millions of dollars lead to a possible suicide attempt (which Borg denies) in one case and sucking up to drug dealers and murderers (for protection) in the other? It begins with a sense of entitlement, an extravagant lifestyle unsupported by sound financial investments, broken marriages and greater self-belief than self-knowledge. None of this was helped by the poor advisers around them, dodgy business deals, and thinking addled by the pills. Fame and fortune are great servants but terrible masters.

Tennis is an individual sport, and in their time the two BBs were each head of a corporate of one, having to handle the business, the psychology, the training, the travel, the relationships, the tournaments mostly on their own

Yet, it is difficult to conclude that the players brought it on themselves and leave it at that. No one who saw the Borg-John McEnroe classics of the 1980s before the American ended the Swede's run of five successive Wimbledon titles, or a young Becker scything through the opposition, throwing himself across the court to retrieve the ball and create impossible angles, can be unaffected by their later stories. We may not understand, but we sympathise, despite the occasional note of victimhood in the memoirs.

Highs and lows

Tennis isn't the main feature in the books. Some of Borg's match descriptions are downright pedestrian, but the sport is always visible through the lifestyle. The tennis in Becker's story is more focused, and sheds light on personal relations with rivals like Pat Cash and Michael Stich.

Some of the events around top flight tennis are delineated by both authors. Borg confirms he received appearance money in cash; getting it home past the customs was the least of the problems. On one occasion, he was mugged in his hotel room, on another the payment was made in one-dollar bills which must have made it seem he was carrying his bed and possibly his room past customs. There was a time when he discovered that the money was counterfeit.

Tennis, which took them to such highs and lows, also helped both Borg and Becker overcome their setbacks; not the game itself, but the discipline, the training, the restraint, the concentration they brought to it. Becker took a course on stoicism in prison; Borg was a stoic to begin with. In any case, Epictetus and Seneca didn't have to deal with tabloids and frenzied fans. Their partners played a role too in the redemption – Patricia in Borg's case and Lilian in Becker's.

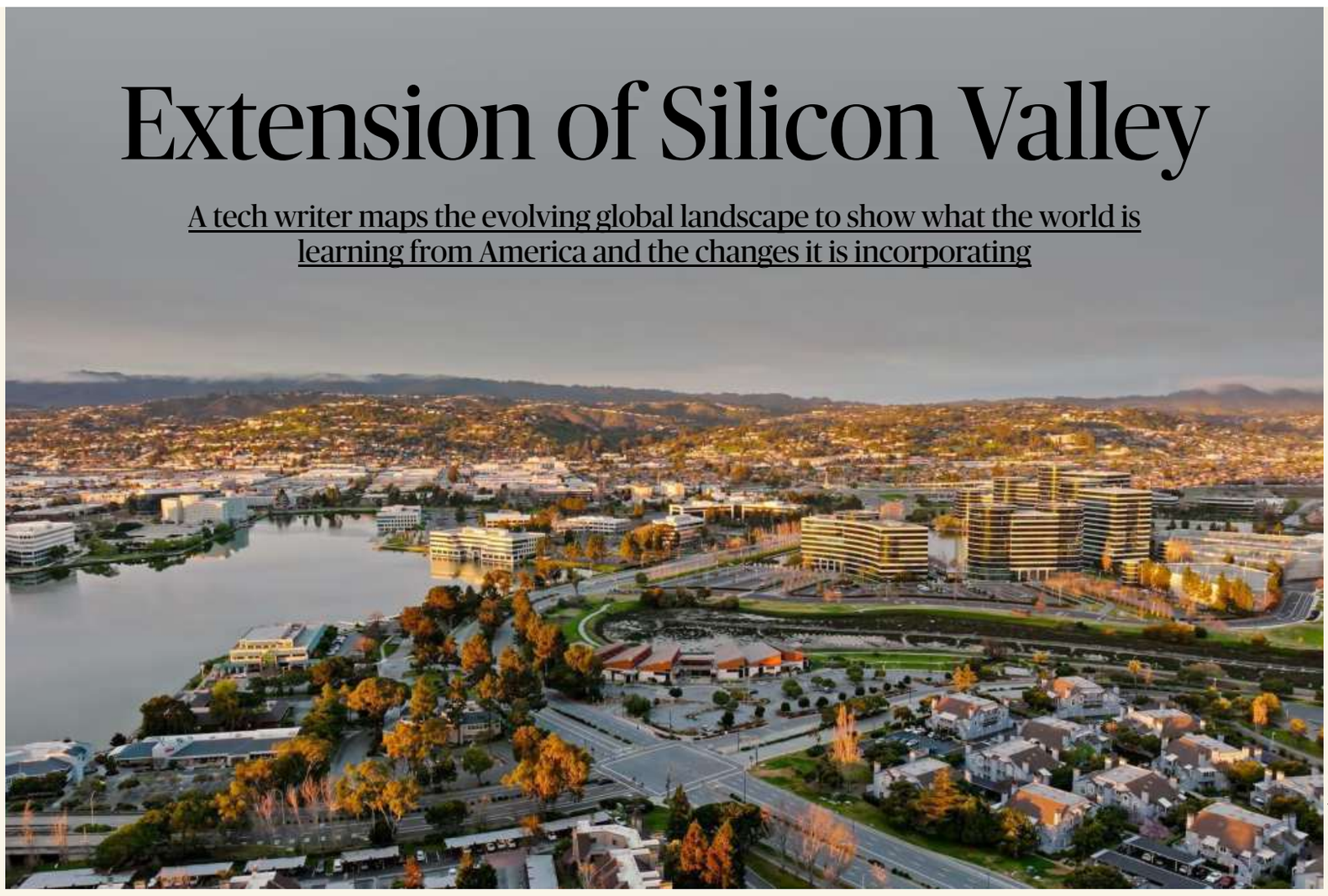
Nietzsche said we are all play actors of our ideals. At a very young age we pretend we are already what we want to be: great sportsmen, actors or artists. In their teens, Borg and Becker already had the world at their feet. No pretence was needed, they were already rich and famous. What happened afterwards was not inevitable, but explicable.

In rising above the miseries, both displayed the character and resilience that make not just for great sportsmen, but inspiring human beings too. Sometimes you have to negotiate a path through suffering and pain to arrive at the normality so coveted by those who lead an unreal life.

The reviewer's latest book is Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?.

Extension of Silicon Valley

A tech writer maps the evolving global landscape to show what the world is learning from America and the changes it is incorporating



GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

John Xavier
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Mehran Gul's *The New Geography of Innovation* is a meticulously researched and remarkably insightful cartography of the evolving global tech landscape. I embarked on this reading with an almost philosophical curiosity, particularly given the ongoing debates about where the true levers of technological progress reside. Gul's journey through various innovation ecosystems is not just informative but profoundly revealing, especially in his nuanced acceptance of Silicon Valley's enduring, indeed accelerating, dominance.

Gul starts by framing the familiar narrative: the ascendant China as the "precocious student", out-executing its teachers with breathtaking speed in areas such as AI deployment, EVs, and mobile payments. His detailed accounts of Tencent's meteoric rise, China's "deployment advantage," and its massive state-backed initiatives are compelling. We see how the "lived change index" in places like Shenzhen fosters a public highly receptive to new technologies, providing an unparalleled testbed for scale. For a while, the book holds out the tantalising possibility that the long-predicted shift in technological gravity might indeed be happening, propelled by sheer will, speed, and state-backed capital.

Unassailable leadership

However, as Gul delves deeper into the foundational elements of true innovation, particularly in 'Steeples of Excellence,' his analysis subtly but decisively pivots. Through the lens of seasoned Silicon Valley figures like John Hennessy and the empirical evidence of AI concentration, he confronts the undeniable reality: the U.S., and specifically the Bay Area, isn't just holding steady, its innovation engine is accelerating. The sheer clustering of pivotal AI companies like OpenAI and Anthropic in 'Cerebral Valley', combined with Nvidia's stranglehold on AI chips, presents a picture of formidable, perhaps unassailable, leadership.

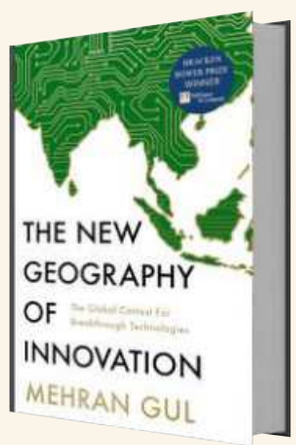
Gul points out that the U.S.' ability to attract and integrate global talent, its unique venture capital ecosystem, driven by FOMO and a willingness to "manufacture courage", forms a flywheel that others, including China, struggle to replicate. The shift in Chinese AI talent, from home-grown heroes moving to the U.S. to firms relocating their headquarters to skirt geopolitical tensions, underscores Gul's ultimate conclusion: America's commanding lead in frontier technologies is not only vast but, by most conventional metrics, widening. The world, Gul asserts, increasingly positions itself as an extension of Silicon Valley, rather than its challenger.

What the future holds

But here, I diverge from the implied valorisation of this trajectory. While Gul pragmatically accepts the data points signalling American scale and growth, his exploration of 'Busting Monasteries' in Europe, particularly through the evolving perspective of Saul Klein, offers what I personally find to be a far more critical and ultimately more important pathway for the future of innovation.

Klein, the venture capitalist who initially aimed to export the "Silicon Valley mindset" to Europe, ultimately realises its inherent flaws – the "aggressive, hard-driving culture", surveillance capitalism, privacy breaches, and anti-competitive behaviours. He posits Europe's unique opportunity: not to replicate Silicon Valley's model, but to go beyond it, to build a "values-driven ecosystem" rooted in ethics, sustainability, equity, and privacy.

This "European challenge to the orthodoxy" is the truly disruptive innovation the world needs. We've witnessed the social and ethical fallout of pure, unrestrained "move fast and break things" capitalism. The DeepMind story, with its internal struggle over ethical control and the eventual separation attempts from Google, vividly illustrates the cost of soulless growth. Switzerland's DP-3T contact tracing protocol, prioritising decentralisation and privacy over mere efficiency, stands as a testament to what value-driven tech can achieve. Germany's "New Mittelstand", focusing on "deep tech" and long-term, multi-generational planning rather than quarterly gains, may appear slower on the surface but offers a more resilient and responsible model.



The New Geography of Innovation
Mehran Gul
HarperCollins India
₹599

Gul correctly observes that the world's newer tech economies are becoming "strikingly similar" in their operational models – DARPA-like agencies, venture-backed startups, casual corporate cultures. This convergence, however, is a superficial one. What Europe, under the banner of values-based innovation, is attempting is a fundamental re-architecture of innovation purpose. It's not about inventing slightly better mousetraps, nor about efficient deployment at scale. It's about designing technology that serves a holistic societal good, not just maximising capital appreciation or corporate power.

The challenge is immense, as Gul acknowledges with the struggles of Graphcore or the fragmented European capital markets. Yet, for a futurist, the crucial question isn't simply "who builds the biggest company?" but "who builds the best future?" Silicon Valley, by Gul's account, leads in making new technologies happen. But Europe, through the emerging vision of its innovators and policymakers, is uniquely positioned to lead in defining what it means for those technologies to be good.

The relentless pursuit of capital appreciation, while undeniably efficient at generating wealth, has often come at significant social cost. Europe's bet, then, is that the ultimate differentiator, the truly superior innovation, will lie in building technologies that are not only profitable and ingenious but also ethical and sustainable. That is the kind of innovation that builds resilient societies, not just fortunes, and for the long term, that's more important than any fleeting trillion-dollar valuation.

In the long term (Clockwise from right) Jayant Kumar; James Fernandes; and Palak Chauhan. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

CHASING FIRE, FACING REALITY

Money makes money

Vivek Kaul, finance columnist and author of *Bad Money: Inside the NPA Mess and How It Threatens the Indian Banking System* (2020), says, "Only when one invests a lot of money, and catches the upcycle [like some people have managed to do in the last five years in the stock market], does the concept of FIRE work. Invested money grows and leaves one with more money to retire early. This is an important point that people tend to forget."

What captures the imagination of FIRE enthusiasts are the success stories. FIRE allows Ravi to go on extended foreign trips with his family, often impromptu. "We look at our expenses after the trip instead of planning the budget," the IIT Kharagpur alumnus says. "Earlier, duration, airlines and seats, mode of transport, accommodation, neighbourhoods, and places to eat would be budgeted. Now, we plan based on comfort." In Singapore, he splurged on Express passes at Universal Studios, which cost him around $300 (approx. ₹20,397) for his family of three. Before FIRE, he would have opted to stand in long queues in the sweltering heat instead.

Paradox of leisure

Psychologist Dhara Ghuntla, affiliated with Mumbai's Sujay Hospital, warns that early retirement experiences might not be the same for everyone. "Early retirement is often imagined as freedom from pressure, but it can also mean freedom from structure, stimulation, and meaning – the three pillars that sustain emotional and cognitive health." The situation might be even worse for a social butterfly. "Occupational environments provide built-in opportunities for social regulation – interaction, feedback loops, and a sense of contribution. These play a protective role against social withdrawal and emotional dysregulation. When work is abruptly removed, especially without alternative social roles, one might face increased isolation, loss of social confidence, and emotional blunting," says Ghuntla.

The loss of a professional identity post-FIRE is why Ravi is building an AI-driven personal-finance platform for Indians. "I'm calling it Handa Uncle – the identity crisis is obvious." With the monetary cushion to experiment, he adds that there is also a vanity factor attached to it. "Who knows, because of [Handa Uncle], someday I might be on the cover of *Forbes* magazine."

His wife, Neha, 41, prioritises motherhood now. She drops off and picks up their four-year-old from school and organises weekend edutainment workshops (by choice, not necessity) in their housing society in Jaipur. "There's play, arts and crafts, storytelling, and other brain gym activities," she says.

A word from the sceptics

Meanwhile, financial experts advise caution when it comes to online posts about success stories. "FIRE is basically selling a story – by those in the business of managing money," says Kaul. "They need a catchy story to sell to their prospective clients. The moment one uses a term like FIRE, it grabs the attention of people who are financially illiterate or not as literate to be able to see through the fact that it is mere storytelling. It is important to look beyond what is being projected as a story on social media."

Halan agrees. "FIRE is a dream sold by influencers who display their lifestyles to others and encourage them to either take more risks with their money or do some side hustle to make more money than a job pays," she says. "But it does take a good 20-25 years to get there [to FIRE] on a salary."

Regardless of FIRE, savings are advised as important for working and non-working individuals. Kaul says, "The first aim should be to save money and build an emergency fund, and then go about building more savings." While he acknowledges that people typically tend to save for a particular goal, he says one should aim to save in order to make better decisions for themselves "and to have some control over your time". "Say, you're faced with sudden unemployment but have money in the bank, this means that you have slightly more time to look for a new job instead of settling for whatever comes your way," he adds.

Go easy, not aggressive

Instead of running behind numbers off the Internet to save aggressively beyond your means, Mohan suggests going easy on hard-core FIRE and to opt for Coast FIRE or Barista FIRE, which feel "more humane" (*see box on page 1*).

"The point isn't to retire at 35 with a big corpus. It's to reach a stage where money doesn't dictate every decision," says Mohan. "FIRE is not about never working again. It's about optionality and never feeling trapped again. You can work fewer hours, freelance, consult, teach, run a business, or do something completely different."

Luck by chance

FIRE might seem like an exit strategy from an all-consuming 9-to-5 rat race, but the path to financial independence is fraught with risks and requires the correct alignment of many factors. "There's so much competition in India, hard work and talent are not enough – one needs luck [and privilege] by their side," says Ravi. "Someone can keep saving and do all the right things, but they can still end up in an unfortunate situation."

The author is a Bengaluru-based features writer.

ARE YOU READY TO FIRE?

- Do you have a high-paying job and are debt free?
- Are you earning in a tax-free country, in USD or EUR, right now and plan on returning to India?
- Are you able to save at least 20% of your income over and above your PF?
- Do you own the flat you live in without a mortgage?
- Are your parents debt-free and not dependent on you?
- Would you be willing to shift your base from a Tier 1 city to a Tier 2 city?

— Although many factors are at play, Palak Chauhan says if you've answered 'Yes' to any of the above, it might be slightly easier to achieve FIRE

Scan the QR code to watch Lavanya Mohan deconstruct the concept of FIRE on **magazine.thehindu.com**

CREATING THE *MAYA* MULTIVERSE

Filmmaker Anand Gandhi and game designer Zain Memon on 'building a lore' for a global media franchise

Aroon Deep
aroon.deep@thehindu.co.in

In the early hours of a day in October in a North Goa mansion, the lights are out throughout the property – except for an office at the far end with a long table, where a team of young designers and coders is burning the midnight oil to build a media franchise spanning board games, novels, video games, films... everything that can be constructed around a fictional world.

This is the nerve centre of *Maya*, a "narrative universe" being crafted by Anand Gandhi, the independent filmmaker behind the philosophical *Ship of Theseus*, which premiered at the 2012 Toronto International Film Festival, and the 2018 horror fantasy *Tumbbad*. For this project, Gandhi, 45, has teamed up with his longtime collaborator Zain Memon, 35, who led the development of *Shasn*, a political strategy board game that has found both mainstream success and a dedicated following among board-game aficionados.

Maya is set on the planet of Neh, a universe with seven species in constant tension, ruled by a near-omniscient class of "divine" beings that draw their power from the control of a planetary network of trees that can read their minds, simulate futures, and give the ruling class a panoramic view of the world. For most beings on this planet, *not* tethering to the tree for extended periods is akin to borderline treason.

The setting is a playground for the philosophies Memon and Gandhi have toyed with in their other works: the nature of political power in *Shasn*, the whole and its parts in *Ship of Theseus*, and now everything from surveillance capitalism to AI in *Maya*. What is the best medium for fables on these burning questions? *Maya*'s answer, it seems, is all of the above.

Unique architecture

Franchises on the scale of *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* or Marvel have eluded India so far. But that is not to say that the country does not have the talent for it. In fact, cities like Mumbai and Bengaluru have a large industry dedicated to post-production and visual effects. But that alone does not lead to a lasting cultural legacy, nor does it yield the substantial funding that actual ownership over a transmedia franchise can entail.

The work that Department of Lore, the holding firm for *Maya*, has done so far, far exceeds what might be expected of a franchise that hasn't fully released its first entry. "We spent four years on the lore," Memon says from his office, next to a table with prototypes of game pieces for *Yuyutsu*, the *Maya* universe's first board game. From generations of in-universe history to a Sanskrit-inspired series of terms (included in the first book as a pages-long appendix), the world has been prepared well in advance.

And the funding has followed. Gandhi and Memon initiated a slick crowdfunding campaign, promising early backers a numbered edition of the first book, and other rewards. Against a $10,000 target, Maya raised over $400,000. The marketing has been intentionally geared to a global audience from the get go, with an audiobook narrated by Australian actor Hugo Weaving (Agent Smith in *The Matrix*), and with much of the initial contributions coming from outside India.

"We even had to rethink the architecture," Memon says, as the in-universe species (the *svaankas*) need their own aesthetic. The duo partnered with an architecture college, to have students design dwellings for each *svaanka*. One of those designs has already won a prize, earning the franchise its first accolade.

Why so many formats at the same time? Why not start with one and then work on others if the demand calls for it? "We have to realise that monoculture is dead," Memon says. Earlier, a family would gather around a TV, but now everyone at home is consuming their own media. *Maya*, he says, is poised to give everyone an "entry point" into this world.

A cultural monument

"The community has been so warm, so welcoming," Gandhi says in a video call from New York, after spending weeks at various conventions promoting *Maya*. "We started with Worldcon in Seattle, L.A. Comic Con, and then we had New York Comic Con which really brought the Kickstarter campaign to an end."

For him, *Maya* has been a chance to address heavy philosophical concepts, something that the first book, *Maya: Seed Takes Root*, which releases next February, is brimming with. "For us, it's not only a commercial question," he insists, but "a question of deploying the ideas, concepts, and insights that we have in the language of fable and metaphor, expressed in experiences that come in passive and interactive frameworks."

The idea is "not only to speculate and simulate" the future, he says, but to "prototype it and model it so that we can build it". It is no accident, therefore, that *Seed Takes Root* uses its characters to explore parallels to everything, from race, caste, and immigration to issues like surveillance and AI. The creatures may be winged, serpentine and alien, but as with all fables, the message is designed for earthly consumption and reflection.

Gandhi hopes Maya will be a "vast cultural monument that will live and breathe in films and games and graphic novels and pretty much every expression we have invented".

In purely commercial terms, what Maya may be on the cusp of – a franchise built in India for the world – is novel enough. But, Gandhi says, this is just a means to an end. "The truth is that we are not a media franchise at all, in the way that media franchises are usually understood," he says. "We are not a cash grab studio. We are trying to create a framework, a narrative framework that becomes an ideology sandbox," he says. Memon adds that there are plans to open up the world of *Maya* to external writers through API, or an application programming interface, a term usually limited to programmers making different pieces of code work together.

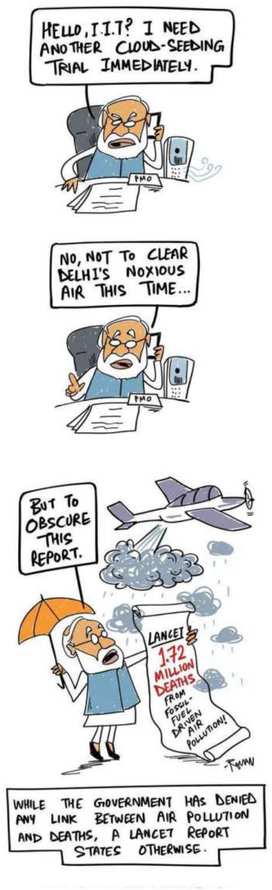
Overall, *Maya* will, Gandhi hopes, swim against the tide of Western cultural domination in both popular culture and classical philosophy. "Our generation is the one that has the resources and the wherewithal to show up at the table," he says.

(Clockwise from left) Creatives from the *Maya* universe; Anand Gandhi; the first novel, *Maya: Seed Takes Root*; and Zain Memon. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

Scan the QR code to watch Gandhi and Memon in conversation on **magazine.thehindu.com**

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty


HELLO, I.I.T? I NEED ANOTHER CLOUD-SEEDING TRIAL IMMEDIATELY.
TWO
NO, NOT TO CLEAR DELHI'S NOXIOUS AIR THIS TIME...
TWO
BUT TO OBSCURE THIS REPORT.
LANCET
1.72 MILLION DEATHS FROM FOSSIL FUEL DRIVEN AIR POLLUTION!
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WHILE THE GOVERNMENT HAS DENIED ANY LINK BETWEEN AIR POLLUTION AND DEATHS, A LANCET REPORT STATES OTHERWISE.

WORLD URDU DAY SPOTLIGHT

INSIDE LUCKNOW'S URDU LANDMARK

In an age of screens and declining sales, devoted patrons and efforts to revive it as a cultural hub may yet save the famous bookstore Danish Mahal

Laraib Fatima Warsi

It is while flipping through the yellowed pages of an old feedback register at Danish Mahal that I spot Manzoor Parwana. Seated quietly in his chair, sipping a glass of tea, the 77-year-old retired officer from Lucknow's Agriculture Department exudes calm dedication, seemingly inseparable from the ancient walls around him.

Down the narrow, bustling lanes of Aminabad, in the heart of Lucknow, Danish Mahal is an Urdu bookstore that has long been a sanctuary for poets, scholars, writers, and thinkers. It occupies the ground floor of a multi-purpose structure, with a simple verandah acting as a buffer from the lively street. Many argue that calling it merely a bookstore understates its value. It's better seen as a *maqam-e-hikmat* (place of wisdom), *tarbiyat-gah* (centre for nurturing), and *taleem-gah* (institution of learning).

Parwana has been coming to Danish Mahal for over two decades; it's a part of his daily routine now. Over the years, the bookstore has welcomed countless visitors, and not all of them Muslim. Lovers of Urdu writing and poetry such as author Himanshu Bajpai and poet Abhishek Shukla return again and again. "Urdu was widely spoken across India during the British rule, transcending religious and regional boundaries. The misconception that it is exclusive to Muslims is rooted in colonial-era divisions and does not reflect its true heritage," says Parwana.

Protecting its legacy

Established in 1939, Danish Mahal was envisioned as a welcoming haven for enthusiasts of the language. Here, under the warm glow of lamps and the musk of vintage volumes, literary luminaries such as Maulvi Abdul Haq (revered as the Father of Urdu), Islamic scholar Abdul Majid Daryabadi, and poets Josh Malihabadi and Munawwar Rana gathered to converse about the beauty of the language. Many even paused to write their reflections in that very register. "We used to engage in deeply nuanced literary conversations. But over time, that vibrancy faded. Now, we lack such voices...most of them have passed away," Parwana laments.

Naeem Ahmed, 55, is the fourth-generation owner of the bookstore. "I feel that as Urdu fades from our streets, signboards, and school curriculum, Danish Mahal stands firm, playing a vital role in preserving Lucknow's Urdu heritage" he says. Yet, the signs of decline are unmistakable. Danish Mahal is seeing a steady dip in book purchases and readership. Colleges and universities, which used to place regular orders, have largely stopped doing so. "Buying power has decreased significantly. Institutions such as the Uttar Pradesh Urdu Academy offer discounts to consumers, yet never extend them to independent bookstores like ours, making it difficult for us to sustain operations," says Ahmed.

Several neighbouring bookstores in Aminabad have shut down. "Danish Mahal survives because of devoted readers, writers, and Urdu lovers," he says. The bookstore hasn't organised a formal literary event since its heyday, but Ahmed is keen to change that. "We aim to restore the bookshop, revive literary meet-ups, and invite Urdu-language musicians and artists so Danish Mahal becomes a lively, creative space. We'll also enhance our social media presence." A move that will find fans among its regulars.

Mohammad Zafar, 60, a retired insurance professional from Faizabad, is one such regular. "If I'm visiting relatives in Lucknow, a trip to Danish Mahal is non-negotiable," he says. "I used to drop by every two or three months to pick up books and magazines, but now that they take [online] orders, it's much easier for book lovers like me."

Generations of bookworms

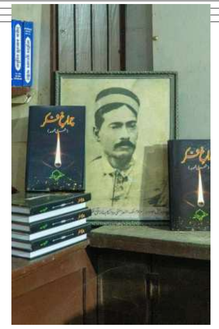
Youngsters are not immune to the charm of this place. Faiz Yunus Majzoob, a 27-year-old pursuing his master's at Lucknow University, recalls his first visit in 2012. "It was to find an Ibn-e-Safi [Pakistani fiction writer] Urdu novel that I couldn't find elsewhere. From then, Danish Mahal has called me back."

For many young people, however, its aesthetic appeal is the main draw. "My generation seems to lack the patience for reading, and treat bookstores more as social media props," states Majzoob. "Take Faqir Chand [the family-run bookstore] in Delhi's Khan Market. It's less a place to browse books than a hotspot for Instagram selfies." That said, he says some do visit, "especially to pick up [Pakistani poet] Jaun Eliya's poetry, which gives me hope".

To Reshma Parveen, head of the Urdu department at Khun Khun Ji Girls PG College, Danish Mahal is a *tarbiyat-gah* (centre for nurturing). She believes that "while challenges persist, the enduring passion for Urdu will ensure its survival", leading it to continue as a vital institution of knowledge, literature, and language.

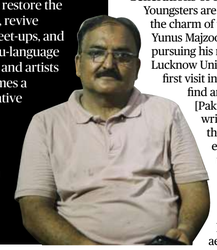
She recalls a serendipitous meeting at the store years ago. "I had been searching for a book on [Urdu poet] Mir Taqi Mir for my research, but it was unavailable in the market. Then, I met short story writer and journalist Abid Suhail Sahab at Danish Mahal. He told me, 'I have the book... you can have it.' I visited his home in Aliganj [about 8 km from Danish Mahal] to collect it, and the warmth he showed left a lasting impression. To this day, that beautiful volume [written by Urdu writer and philanthropist Maqbool Ahmad Lari] remains on my bookshelf," Parveen says. She and others cherish the countless connections forged through Danish Mahal where "simply asking for a book might lead to you forming deep, enduring bonds".

The writer is an independent journalist based out of Lucknow.



Danish Mahal survives because of devoted readers, writers, and Urdu lovers. We aim to restore the bookshop, revive literary meet-ups, and invite Urdu-language musicians and artists so it becomes a lively, creative space

NAEEM AHMED
Owner of Danish Mahal



(Clockwise from above) Manzoor Parwana; and books and inscriptions at Danish Mahal. (MONIS KHAN)

It saddens us to witness Urdu's decline from school syllabi to street signs. Yet, amidst these changes, Danish Mahal stands resilient in safeguarding the city's rich literary heritage

MOHD HAROON RASHEED
Editor of Urdu daily *Avadhnama*

Scan the QR code and visit Danish Mahal on **magazine.thehindu.com**

BINGE WATCH

Toying with the yakuza

Why do Indian filmmakers keep using Japan merely as a filter, without any meaningful context?

Director Sujeeth's latest action thriller, the Pawan Kalyan gangster drama *They Call Him OG* (which began streaming on Netflix in October), has a curious pacing problem, one that has become increasingly common among star vehicles in Telugu cinema.

Every time the plot threatens to move in an interesting direction, Sujeeth freezes the main narrative and subjects the audience to yet another flashback that underlines, for the umpteenth time, how lethal Kalyan's exiled gangster OG (Ojas Gambheera) is, how his very name strikes terror in the hearts of his enemies, how all and sundry bow down to his everlasting magnificence et cetera.

And for some reason, Sujeeth chooses to do this within a Japanese framework here. OG is shown to have trained at a Japanese dojo in his childhood, his weapon of choice throughout the film is a *katana*, the film's credit sequences have a Japanese-inspired font, and the *yakuza* clans he annihilates still call him 'Master Orochi Genshin' in fear and awe.

And yet, for all of this, there is no real engagement with Japanese culture or society in the film. Replacing Japan with, say, China, in any scene here would not have made an iota of difference to the screenplay. Not to mention, one actor after another confidently mispronounces '*yakuza*' throughout the film (the emphasis ought to be on 'ya', not 'ku'). Sujeeth's deployment of Japan here is, therefore, akin to Instagram users applying 'filters' to their vacation photographs. And he is hardly alone: over the last year or so, several Indian filmmakers have chosen to use Japan as the window-dressing-of-choice in their action thrillers.

Katana craze

For instance, on Independence Day, two high-budget action thrillers clashed at the box office – Ayan Mukerji's Hindi-language *War 2*, starring Hrithik Roshan and NTR Jr., and Lokesh Kanagaraj's Tamil film *Coolie*, starring Rajinikanth. *War 2* begins with a rather perfunctory Japan-set sequence where Roshan single-handedly kills scores of *yakuza* fighters and finally, their ageing boss, who waffles on about honour and duty even as his men are mowed down all around him.

Coolie goes full Japan in its interval block sequence, where in the middle of a drunken revelry, Rajinikanth whips out a *katana* and uses it to kill a minor character out of the blue. He then poses on a rooftop, *katana* draped around his left shoulder, as the lit-up word 'kingpin' shines behind him.

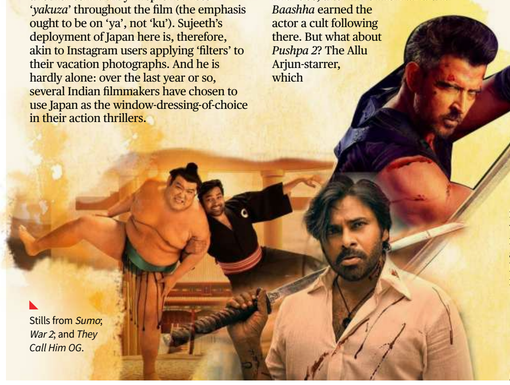
With Rajinikanth, one can at least offer the logic of appealing to his Japanese fans, of which there are many since the mid-'90s, after films like *Muthu* and *Baashha* earned the actor a cult following there. But what about *Pushpa 2*? The Allu Arjun-starrer, which became one of the most profitable films of 2024, begins with a bizarre dream sequence, wherein Arjun's uneducated, functionally illiterate sandalwood smuggler Pushpa finds himself in Japan via his own smuggling vessels – and lo and behold, he claims to have taught himself Japanese on the journey there. He soon taunts his *yakuza* counterparts in Japanese and hands out a fearful thrashing – before he wakes up, of course. The film does not return to this scene at all across the next three hours and nobody even tries to explain why or how Pushpa's dream-tongue is Japanese.

Similarly, the teaser for Salman Khan's recent *Sikandar* (directed by A.R. Murugadoss) featured Khan taking on a group of gangsters in Japanese-style 'antler helmets' (worn by warlords and chieftains in medieval Japan).

Return of the sumo

A recent Tamil-language comedic movie attempts to engage with Japan a bit more earnestly – at least at first. In *Sumo*, directed by S.P. Hosimin and starring Shiva alongside Japanese actor and former sumo wrestler Yoshinori Tashiro, the narrative follows a sumo wrestler who washes up ashore near Chennai one morning – comedic hijinks ensue when happy-go-lucky surfer Shiva and his girlfriend Kani (Priya Anand) decide to help the hapless, disoriented wrestler who they dub 'Ganesh'. *Sumo*'s premise is simple but promising and had a lot of potential for funny, empathetic commentary about xenophobia, building cultural bridges *et al*. Instead, it opts to make jokes about the sumo wrestler's belly, and his broken English and Tamil are likened to a developmental disability.

I am not entirely sure how or why Japan has become the fetish of choice for Indian films – one would have thought South Korea would be the more obvious target, given the rampant popularity of K-dramas, K-beauty and so on. But whatever the reason, for the love of God, somebody has to stop Indian filmmakers from going overboard.



Stills from *Sumo*; *War 2*; and *They Call Him OG*.

Aditya Mani Jha *is a writer and journalist working on his first book of non-fiction.*

Passengers waiting at New Delhi railway station ahead of Chhath festival in Bihar. (GETTY IMAGES)

EXCERPT

COUNTING CASTE

The caste census can be just another means of keeping social divisions intact, argues Anand Teltumbde in his new book

Is the caste census, agreed upon by all political parties, going to attack the foundations of the caste system? A new book, The Caste Con Census *by* ***Anand Teltumbde*** *(published by Navayana), argues that like the reservation policy, this will only manage the caste hierarchy, not annihilate it. An edited excerpt:*

In recent years, the demand for a caste census has grown into a national chorus. What began as a call from Mandalite leaders and regional parties eventually gained traction among mainstream opposition forces, with the Congress and its leader Rahul Gandhi vocally taking up its cause. In response, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) dismissed the demand in stark ideological terms, branding it 'urban Naxal thought' and decrying it as a divisive agenda. It echoed the BJP government's 2021 affidavit to the Supreme Court that the exclusion of caste data from the census was its 'conscious policy decision'. Modi, in his characteristic rhetorical style, declared during the 2024 election campaign that for him, the only four castes were women, youth, farmers and the poor.

It was, therefore, a major surprise when the Modi government, on April 30, 2025, reversed its long-held position and announced that the forthcoming national census would include caste enumeration. It marked a sharp departure from the Sangh Parivar's longstanding ideological stance of viewing caste enumeration as a threat to Hindu unity. The sudden turn – especially after resisting such demands for nearly a decade – invites further scrutiny.

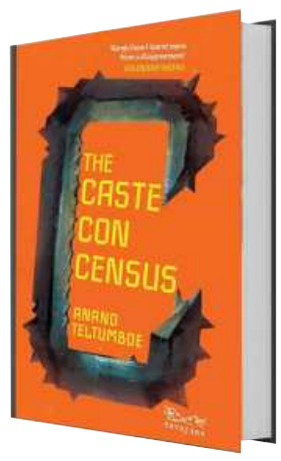
The most pressing factor behind this U-turn is the upcoming 2025 Bihar assembly election. In Bihar, caste has historically played a decisive role in politics, from colonial times to the present. To persist with its opposition to the caste census would have put the BJP at odds with its newly reinstated ally, Janata Dal (United) leader Nitish Kumar, who had successfully conducted a caste survey in Bihar in 2022 and politically benefited from it. Following the BJP's electoral setback in the 2024 general election, Modi was able to form a government only with the support of Nitish Kumar (with 12 MPs) and N. Chandrababu Naidu of Telugu Desam Party (16 MPs). Their continued support remains critical for the stability of the regime and the future of its ideological agenda.

But to reduce the volte-face to coalition compulsions alone would be misleading. The decision reflects deeper electoral and strategic calculations. The BJP's support base has shifted over the last decade, with lower OBCs emerging as its most loyal and durable constituency. Unlike the upper-caste middle class, which can read through the party's tactics, this segment is seemingly happy with symbolic recognition. By agreeing to a caste census, the BJP may be seeking to consolidate these voters further, under the pretext of justice, but ultimately to bolster their electoral arithmetic. These strategies may remain speculative, but they underline a larger truth: caste census is no longer just a policy matter, it has become a battlefield in the Indian political imagination.

A governance tool

This is not the first time caste has been used as a tool for governance. After the revolt of 1857, British administrators saw caste as a way to divide and manage Indian society, laying the groundwork for what became an elaborate system of enumeration and classification. Starting with the 1881 census and continuing until 1931, caste enumeration became a key mechanism of colonial control. It was paused thereafter, though not because caste had disappeared. Instead, it became reified and institutionalised, no longer requiring annual reinforcement. The postcolonial state, far from rejecting this legacy, absorbed and normalised it under a new idiom of 'social justice'.

The transition from colonial to postcolonial governance did not disrupt caste as a scaffolding for the structure of power. It merely changed the language in which it was legitimised. The constitutional state not only accepted caste as a social reality but also encoded it into its mechanisms of redress, particularly through reservations. Though introduced with the stated aim of achieving equality, these measures ultimately served a similar purpose as under colonial rule: managing and manipulating social groups to serve political objectives, albeit with far greater cunning than the colonial rulers.



What good is caste data?

[We must] question the dominant assumption – shared across progressive and reactionary camps – that caste data is an unqualified good. What is often missed is that enumeration is not a neutral exercise. Like its colonial predecessor, today's caste census risks becoming a commanding ritual – one that does not simply reflect caste realities but actively shapes them, making caste more legible, administrable and politically salient. The long-term impact of this exercise deserves careful reflection. To assess its implications, we must return to the question of caste itself – its historicity, its uses by different regimes and the reasons for its resilience.

In the final analysis, my position is this: caste is not a problem that can be solved through piecemeal interventions. It is structurally intractable and historically fortified. The only real solution is its annihilation.

This is an edited excerpt published with permission from Navayana.

GOREN BRIDGE

High adventure

Neither vulnerable, West deals

Bob Jones

A player will sometimes make a "clever" bid, knowing that his bid is not descriptive of his hand. He risks deceiving partner but he takes that chance believing he is accomplishing something worthwhile. This can backfire dramatically when partner has a better-than-expected hand and is taken in by the "clever" bid.

South in today's deal was Scottish expert Barnet Shenkin. East apparently pulled the wrong card from his bid box, showing a singleton spade when he had a doubleton. Shenkin wanted to bid, but he did not want a spade lead against a diamond contract. He wanted a heart lead, so he made the "clever" bid of four hearts and then held on while his partner took him on a wild ride. Finally, at the six level, Shenkin corrected to his real major suit.

Shenkin ruffed the opening diamond lead in dummy and cashed the ace of spades. He crossed to his hand with the king of hearts and led the jack of spades, prepared to run it if West played low. East had promised a singleton spade and Shenkin was going to use that to his advantage. To Shenkin's surprise, West played the queen and East followed suit. Shenkin claimed his slam, thanking his lucky stars that East was not dealt the doubleton queen of spades. That would have provided an even better story about Shenkin's bidding adventure.

NORTH
♠ A K 10 8 6
♡ A Q 9 8 7 6 2
◇ Void
♣ K

WEST
♠ Q 5
♡ J 10 4
◇ A K J 9 8
♣ 9 6 4

EAST
♠ 4 2
♡ 5
◇ Q 10 5 2
♣ A J 10 7 5 3

SOUTH
♠ J 9 7 3
♡ K 3
◇ 7 6 4 3
♣ Q 8 2

The bidding:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1◇	2◇*	3♠**	4♡
Pass	4NT	5♣	Pass***
Pass	6♡	Pass	6♠
All pass			

*Both majors
**Explained as a splinter bid, showing diamonds and a singleton spade
***One key card, among the 4 aces and the king of hearts

Opening lead: Ace of ◇

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

What has November 9 ever given us?

Berty Ashley

1 On November 9, 1842, the very first U.S. design patent was issued to George Bruce of New York City. This established a new form of intellectual property rights for something based on how it looks. What did he design, which one would now say is a 'serif'?

2 Born this date in 1914, Hedy Lamarr was an actress who Louis Mayer of MGM promoted as the "world's most beautiful woman". Although self-taught, she conceived a frequency-hopping system to jam torpedoes. What two essential technologies in your mobile phone wouldn't exist but for her work?

3 On November 9, 1914, the German submarine SMS Emden was sunk by HMAS Sydney in the Battle of Cocos. This was celebrated in a city in India, as it was responsible for the only World War I attack on the country. Which city was bombed by the SMS Emden on September 22, 1914?

4 Born on this date in 1934, Carl Sagan was an American astrophysicist who was one of the most influential science communicators of all time. On February 14, 1990, thanks to him, Voyager 1 took a photo known as the 'Pale Blue Dot' from six billion kilometres away. What tiny thing does it show?

Lou Ferrigno won two Mr. Universe titles, but is most famous as the first actor to play an 'angry' version of David Banner. (GETTY IMAGES)

5 On November 9, 1936, American fashion designer Ruth Harkness encountered a nine-week-old animal in Sichuan and took it back home. It became the first live specimen of its kind to enter the United States, causing a huge sensation. What animal is this, where every single specimen belongs to China?

6 Born on this date in 1944, Chitresh Das was a dancer credited with popularising his dance form globally. He even innovated a yoga form of the dance. What dance form gets its name from the fact that it was a form of storytelling?

7 Born on this date in 1951, Lou Ferrigno is an American bodybuilder who won two Mr. Universe titles. He is most famous as the first actor to play a certain character onscreen in 1977. Which character did he play that was the 'angry' version of scientist David Banner?

8 On November 9, 1960, American bass baritone Paul Robeson sang 'Ol' man River' to a group of workers. He was standing on the scaffolding during the construction of an iconic building on Sydney Harbour. He thus became the first performer at which iconic venue?

9 On November 9, 2000, this officially became the 27th State of India. It was formed from 13 districts of northwestern Uttar Pradesh. Which State is also known as 'Devabhumi' due to the number of pilgrimage centres found there?

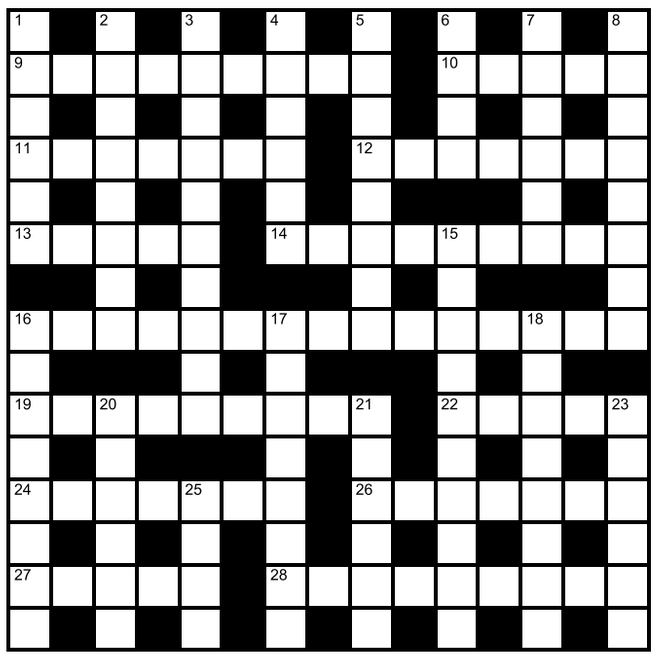
10 On November 9, 2004, the very first version of this free and open-source web browser was released. Developed by the Mozilla Foundation, it was named after the nickname of the red panda, which also became its mascot. What very popular browser is this?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Fonts / Typeface
2. Bluetooth and WIFI
3. Madras / Chennai
4. The Earth
5. Giant Panda
6. Kathak
7. The Incredible Hulk
8. The Opera House
9. Uttarakhand
10. Firefox

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 29 (Set by Gussalufz)



Across

9 Upset jinn tore packages (Ali ultimately put pieces together) (9)
10 Devise escape mechanism (5)
11 Tiny piece of moon brought back in casing of graphite (7)
12 Monkey kept in section with low wall (7)
13 Good indeed, fantastic conclusion by umpire raising finger after catch? (5)
14 Prospect of naughty lap dances? (9)
16 Father had potato (fried), just like that (2,3,4,2,1,3)
19 Bars illegal shoe sale arresting touts at the centre (3,6)
22 Bore child with tips on debate after retirement (5)
24 Fish amino acid he took very regularly? (7)
26 Bleak country in short, there's no hospital! (7)
27 Question: best current opener in cricket? (5)
28 Intimacy on the counter? Lust, getting wasted in odd places? Setter has concerning long-term wild reproduction consequences (9)

Down

1 Wife has one scrambled egg and third of milkshake (6)
2 Direct eccentric star and topless 8 (8)
3 Gussalufz's "EZ" or most elementary level? (6,4)
4 Annoy gangster from the north (6)
5 Criticize revolutions over quick chat (4-4)
6 Overcook chicken horribly and ruin starters (4)
7 Ideal place, you said, to quietly and heartily flirt with one (6)
8 With husband near America, send message around noon: "Anything else we can do?" (4,4)
15 Foetus sits fooling around in this body part (4,6)
16 Perennial bloomer, "Amar _____ Anthony," releasing on Sunday, finally (8)
17 Blowing top, fought about company's latest updated design (8)
18 Lizard spoiled the raita (8)
20 Key feature of rogue's capers (6)
21 Sailor departs around first half of dawn after getting up (3,3)
23 More yawning from the German bored by Go round (6)
25 Main killer or essentially reluctant associate? (4)

SOLUTION NO. 28

■	D	O	G	S	B	R	E	A	K	F	A	S	T	■
A	■	N	■	A	■	A	■	N	■	O	■	T	■	P
N	A	T	A	L	■	T	E	D	D	Y	B	E	A	R
A	■	A	■	I	■	E	■	A	■	E	■	L	■	E
G	O	R	E	V	I	D	A	L	■	R	E	L	I	C
R	■	I	■	A	■	■	■	U	■	■	■	A	■	I
A	P	O	S	T	L	E	■	S	C	H	E	R	Z	O
M	■	■	■	E	■	D	■	I	■	E	■	■	■	U
M	A	T	I	S	S	E	■	A	M	A	S	S	E	S
A	■	R	■	■	■	L	■	■	■	R	■	H	■	M
T	R	A	P	S	■	W	A	I	S	T	L	I	N	E
I	■	N	■	K	■	E	■	N	■	L	■	A	■	T
S	A	C	R	I	F	I	C	E	■	E	X	T	R	A
E	■	E	■	M	■	S	■	R	■	S	■	S	■	L
■	A	D	I	P	O	S	E	T	I	S	S	U	E	■

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Not sparing even in grief

When a woman loses her spouse, society turns its harsh gaze towards her

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Sati was abolished more than a century ago and is a legal offence punishable by the court. Yet, in many ways, the practice continues – not by fire but by societal condemnation.

Recently, a woman I know lost her spouse, and the untimely death shattered the family. What struck me most was not just the depth of her grief but the cruel curiosity of the onlookers. The crowd that gathered seemed less interested in offering consolation but more eager to see how she cried, how she behaved, and how soon she would "move on". After some days, when she started to regain composure and face reality with strength, whispers started that "she seems to be fine too soon". Society does not want a woman to heal; it wants her to be in mourning perennially. She is thrown into a pyre of condemnation.

Today, a woman may not be physically burnt on the pyre of her husband, but society expects her to live in silence, stripped of colour, joy, and identity. Her life may be spared, but her existence is often reduced to a shadow of what it was once.

Society becomes judgmental over all her actions and activities – how she dresses, where she goes, what she eats, and even how she smiles. Judgment often comes from a lack of empathy and limited knowledge. People who have not experienced grief are quick to criticise without understanding the unique pain the person undergoes or challenges that person faces. In this moral policing, what is forgotten is that grief is personal, and there is no prescribed script for mourning.

The labels "widow" and "widower" are dehumanising, crushing bereaved spouses into questioning their identity. These names reduce their life to a single marital status rather than a continuing human journey, and cage them into a single tragic event.

Labelling theory suggests that when society assigns a label to a person, that individual may internalise it, which can influence their self-perception and future behaviour. So, when a woman is constantly referred to as a "widow", she begins to view herself through that lens of loss instead of as a complete, capable individual.

Today, we live in a time when regressive societal practices are subject to criticism, and yet, society remains selectively blind, deaf, and mute when it comes to the everyday oppression of widows. Women empowerment speaks of increasing women's self-worth and control over their lives, and having greater autonomy in public and private spheres. Does this actually happen? The same society which preaches these turns around and dictates how a bereaved woman should behave. True empowerment is not about slogans or symbolic gestures; it is about respecting a woman's right to choose, how she wishes to grieve, heal, and live after loss.

Men, on the other hand, are seldom subjected to such scrutiny. A man who loses his wife continues to attend social gatherings, remarries if he wishes, and is often seen with sympathy rather than scrutiny. But a woman who loses her husband fears society regardless of her education or profession; the joys she enjoyed once are seen as sins after she becomes a widow.

Even in official documents such as job applications, school forms, and housing records, the term "widow" still appears, as if it holds some administrative importance. What purpose does this term serve other than reminding the woman her loss again and again? Widowhood is not a curse or a crime; it is a circumstance of life, much like marriage itself. The psychological judgment is immense. A woman who wishes to rebuild her life, who dreams of love and remarriage, is shamed by criticism. Many suppress their desires fearing the harsh gaze of society, some even slip into depression and anxiety. Actually, the pressure to conform steals away the person's individuality and freedom.

Death is inevitable, a natural conclusion to all our lives. To expect a woman to mourn all her life is to punish her for surviving. Grief and healing take their own time; some recover soon, others take years. Society must stop defining women by their loss and instead support their right to rebuild, to rediscover purpose, and to celebrate life once again. Widowhood should never be a label to limit their dreams. It's time to shift our collective gaze.

Hot and crisp off the griddle

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Dosa, dosai, attu. Call it by any name, the crispy delight has conquered hearts across India. From ancient kitchens to modern cafés, dosa has evolved more than our phone's operating systems.

Legend has it that a resourceful cook in a forgotten kingdom whipped up the first dosa out of sheer desperation – proving once again that necessity is the mother of invention, and hunger is the father. Historical accuracy may vary.

I grew up in a small town in Andhra Pradesh, bordering Karnataka. In my childhood, Udupi-style vegetarian restaurants were our go-to breakfast spots. These hotels had their own default settings: a wide entrance door; a wooden glass shelf stacked with freshly made vadas, Mysore Pak, and mixture; a billing counter with the owner seated always facing east (as per Vasthu); photo frames of deities on every wall, worshipped each morning with sandal-scented agarbathis. The aroma of sandalwood and sambar was a sensory signature. You could even measure the age of a hotel by the soot covering the gods in the photo frames – the more invisible the gods, the older and more trusted the establishment the hotel was.

Dosa came in many avatars – plain (sometimes conical), masala, open, rava, and pesarattu. Leftover batter is reborn as Uttappam, garnished with onions and green chillies – a clever value addition by restaurants.

Every dosa came with mandatory accompaniments: unlimited chutney and sambar, a practice now extinct in most places. Servers (armed with a tiny pencil tucked behind their ear and a manual bill book in their pocket) would place tumblers of sambar right on the table, especially when fed up with our shouting.

A good rapport with the server and the white-clad cashier worked wonders. We used to collect *gatti* chutney (the solid kind, given only with parcels) and sambar in steel cans to enjoy at home, especially when relatives visited during summer vacations.

The gods and goddesses have vanished from the signboards of today's dosa joints, replaced by Gen-Z aspirations. If dosa had a LinkedIn profile, it would list skills such as fusion adaptability, multilingual fillings, and excellent crunch under pressure.

A lakh rupees and a plastic sheet

The stark realities of migrant workers sleeping on the streets during the heavy monsoon

Jyotirman Sinha
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In the shadow of despair and helplessness, a chance encounter with migrant workers reframed my understanding of resilience and privilege.

Amid heavy rain, I stood under a shed opposite the hospital where my mother was admitted. Despite every treatment, her condition remained unchanged. Each day dragged on as if it would never pass. Despair and helplessness loomed so large that they eclipsed every other thought.

It was the monsoon, and rain had become a daily affair. From the shed, I had been noticing a few men for days. They wrapped themselves in plastic sheets and lay down on the footpath for their night's sleep. For them, the rain was only background noise, as if they had already made peace with the despair it carried. That day, while wrestling with my own helplessness, I felt compelled to speak to them.

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

At first, they hesitated, wary of being asked to move. But once reassured, they began to open up. They had come from distant villages to work in catering, wash dishes, carry utensils, and take up any job that came their way to support their families. Their only possession was a mid-sized bag, barely large for a couple of changes of clothes. It also carried the plastic sheet they used each night, leaving little room for anything else. Their existence felt pared down to its most elemental form: survival stripped of any illusion of choice.

As I listened, I could not help but think of the medical expenses for my mother's treatment, an uncertain battle at best, running to more than a lakh rupees a day. The contrast was impossible to ignore.

For them, a lakh was unimaginable wealth. It could take them back to their homes, reunite them with their families, and perhaps even allow them to start something of their own. For me, the same amount was being spent each day, yet it brought no visible improvement to my mother's health. The irony pressed on me. Amid despair and helplessness, another feeling quietly surfaced: privilege. Even in my darkest hour, I realised I stood on ground that others might see as a fortune.

The hospital and the footpath felt like parallel worlds. In one, my mother's despair was carried with resilience amid relative abundance. In the other, despair was born of scarcity, yet met with resilience nonetheless. In the end, one had a lakh rupees, the other a plastic sheet, each a shield against despair. And somehow, the plastic sheet seemed to hold a kind of peace that I could not find for myself. That moment in the rain gave me a perspective I had not expected. The pain did not leave me, but it changed its colour. And in that change, the thought found its place: from a neutral perspective, could it be said that the money would do more good in their hands than in mine?

Head held high with the inflatable pillow

Back then, it was a status symbol, prized accessory

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The age of Artificial Intelligence has seen some life-transforming inventions. But mind you, every generation had its own inventions that took the world by storm. One was the "inflatable pillow". It made overnight train journeys an absolute pleasure.

Much like one would flaunt an iPhone today, back then, your status symbol was defined by carrying an inflatable pillow. It was your prized accessory. Before this novel invention saw the light of day, life was not easy – you had to carry your personal, oversized pillow from home.

That's when the "inflatable pillow" made its grand entry. Suddenly, you didn't have to carry your pillow from home. It was replaced with a sleek, petite inflatable pillow. It looked like an oversized handkerchief – a piece of canvas, that could be

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

carried easily. But this little, diminutive thing was a pocket-sized dynamite when it came to utility. At one corner of the cloth, there was a tiny aperture, fitted with a plastic cap. You blew into the aperture. With each puff, you watched it grow like a balloon. Soon, your pillow was ready.

Stretching yourself on the berth, with this pillow as the headrest, you stared at the overhead, grilled fan. The steady rattle of the rail and the rhythmic rocking lulled you to sleep. It was a pleasure like no other. You owed the experience entirely to the inflatable pillow.

Sometimes, you blew your lungs out, but the pillow would not budge. It stayed flat and stubborn like a child. Breathless, you examined the sides of the pillow, only to find a tiny incision. A safety pin in the suitcase had done the deed.

Nonetheless, the inflatable pillow was your faithful travel companion. What would I not give to get those days back to lie down on that berth, with that blue, inflatable pillow as headrest, to stare at that grilled ceiling fan, and to hear the TTE's voice, "Yes, the train is late by two hours. We are yet to reach Cuddapah. It will reach Renigunta only at 3 a.m. You can sleep till then."

magazine
Backpage
Adman Bobby Pawar on the legend, Piyush Pandey
Drawn to the rebel
100
'CINEMA RUNNING IN HIS VEINS'

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Ritwik Ghatak, a great filmmaker, redefined cinema through his profound storytelling and human sensitivity. ('Cinema running in his veins'; Nov. 2) Even decades later, his work inspires filmmakers and audiences alike, standing as a timeless testament to the art of meaningful cinema.
N.S. Reddy

Adoor Gopalakrishnan provides significant insights into Ghatak's profound impact on Indian cinema. Being an ardent lover of films, I feel proud to learn that Ghatak's instructional role at FTII was instrumental in shaping the careers of many prominent figures within the Indian film industry.
Sajna Hameed

Longing, belonging

Kiran Desai was very candid and forthright when she revealed how she fashioned the female protagonist of her Booker-shortlisted novel, as an aspiring novelist by throwing in a few elements of her own self into the character. ('Nostalgia is a dirty word'; Nov. 2) Desai's painful statement that she is "a person without a country" probably personifies the feelings of many migrants, who are constantly possessed by a gnawing feeling of being neither here nor there.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

Strong will

The indomitable young lady has turned her anguish into an opportunity by sheer perseverance. ('Malala reclaims her story'; Nov 2) She rightly considers the Taliban administration's conduct a betrayal towards Afghan women, who have been excluded from public life.
Her reminder that hope is not passive; it is created one brave step at a time, is a point worth pondering.
Kamal Laddha

The beautiful contradictions in Malala's life are refreshing to see. Though she is a fierce advocate of education, her priority has always been making friends rather than just earning good marks. These qualities make her a genuine person.
S. Sundareswara Pandiyan

Golden days

The article depicting the miserable off-stage lives of circus artists who once dazzled and performed spellbinding stunts on stage, makes for a very sad reading. ('Walking a tightrope in Thalassery'; Nov. 2) K.R. Sunil has done yeoman service to these erstwhile entertainers by featuring them in a photography exhibition.
N. Rama Rao

Rich crafts

India's crafts diversity is equivalent to its social and cultural diversity. ('Keepers of India's handmade soul; Nov. 2) The NGO's dedicated work is priceless.
K. Balakrishnan

Revered adman

Piyush Pandey was an adman known for his talent in advertising. ('Sometimes greatness sports a Rajput moustache'; Nov. 2) Sad that he has passed away so soon, leaving practitioners and students of media and advertising in gloom.
S. Ganesh

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The Digital India paradox
Internet shutdowns become a nightmare of uncertainty for gig workers
Udit Chaudhary

Caught in a cultural conundrum
Migrants require understanding and respect of customs of their adopted country
T.U. James

Reflection by the mango tree
How a teacher can spark the instinct for writing in a student
Narayanan Kizhumundayur

Celebrities in politics
Fame alone does not make someone a successful leader. What matters is intent, competence, commitment
O. Prasada Rao

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NEW ARCHITECTS OF IMMERSION

Takashi Kudo of teamLab on their psychedelic sensory playgrounds and why analogue arguments are a key part of their creative process

Art you can step inside (Clockwise from left) Floating Flower Garden; Takashi Kudo; Order in Chaos; Megaliths in the Bath House Ruins; and Universe of Water Particles in the Tank. (TEAMLAB)

Gautami Reddy

Since its founding in 2001 in Tokyo by engineer and technologist Toshiyuki Inoko, teamLab has grown from a small group of friends experimenting with code and light into one of the most renowned collectives of artists working with technology today. Best known for creating large-scale immersive environments – waterfalls that respond to touch, forests that shimmer and fade, fields of light that seem to breathe, and gardens that bloom and dissolve – teamLab's work evokes the joy of being briefly, blissfully, one with the world.

For years, the art world didn't quite know what to make of them. Takashi Kudo, teamLab's Communications Director, recalled the early days in an interview to Asia Society, stating: "As time went on, while we gained a passionate following among young people, we were still ignored by the Japanese art world. Our debut finally came in 2011 at the Kaikai Kiki Gallery in Taipei, thanks to artist Takashi Murakami."

Since then, teamLab has developed a language entirely its own, creating museums and installations that draw millions worldwide. Among them are teamLab Planets In Tokyo, where visitors walk through water and mirrored gardens, and teamLab Borderless, a "museum without a map" where artworks flow seamlessly across rooms. In San Francisco, teamLab: Continuity extends the Asian Art Museum into a living world of flowers and fish. And in Abu Dhabi, teamLab Phenomena – the collective's most ambitious project yet – merges architecture, art, and nature into one evolving experience, bringing their vision closer than ever to India.

Kudo will be in Mumbai this weekend – nearly a decade after the collective won the Asia Society Asia Arts Award in 2017 – for a conversation with the Asia Society India Centre ahead of Art Mumbai. Edited excerpts:

Question: *I know when I speak to you, I'm not speaking to one person but to an entire collective. So, who is teamLab?*
Answer: teamLab is an art collective. The word 'team' is important: everything we do is a collaborative process. At our very core, we are always researching, not in an academic sense, but to understand how humans recognise and relate to the world, how people understand their very 'being'.

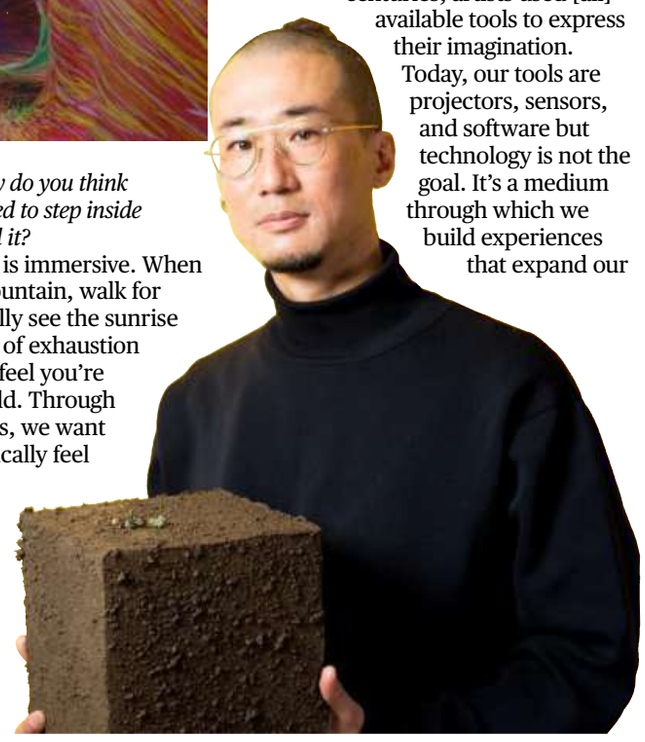
Q: *Who is part of the collective?*
A: To put it differently, we are like a flock of birds or a school of fish, each member moves independently, but together we create one collective motion. There's no leader, it's all organic. Each project attracts the people it needs: software engineers, architects, mathematicians, animators, graphic artists, musicians, writers, coders, and so on. Some people join for fun, some for growth, some for money.

Everyone has their reason. At any given time, there are around 200-300 people involved, depending on the project. The collective keeps expanding and evolving.

Q: *Given how much of your work uses technology, is there still an analogue, non-digital side to your process?*
A: Absolutely. The creative process always involves trial and error, prototypes, failures, arguments. Each member approaches the problem from their own expertise. And yes, we argue – in the most human, analogue way. Those arguments are part of our creative process. They make the work stronger.

Q: *Your work is often described as 'immersive'. Why do you think people today need to step inside something to feel it?*
A: Nature itself is immersive. When you climb a mountain, walk for hours, and finally see the sunrise – that moment of exhaustion and awe – you feel you're part of the world. Through our installations, we want people to physically feel connected, not just to observe art but to become part of it. Today, most people consume the world through screens. But true understanding is physical, like learning to swim. You can read about it or watch videos, but until you jump into the water, you'll never know what it means. Art, too, must be entered with the body.

Q: *Where does technology fit into that relationship between body and world?*
A: Technology is simply a material, like paint or clay once was. For centuries, artists used [all] available tools to express their imagination. Today, our tools are projectors, sensors, and software but technology is not the goal. It's a medium through which we build experiences that expand our perception of the world.



Q: *And yet your work moves between galleries, museums, public spaces, including parks. How has your relationship with 'the art world' evolved through all this?*
A: When we started, the art world didn't take us seriously. Over time, that changed. But our belief remains: only art can change how people think and live. Design, law, politics, they provide answers. Art, on the other hand, asks new questions. And when society changes, the old answers stop working. The industrial revolution gave us one set of 'right answers'. The digital revolution requires new ones. Art helps us find those questions.

And ultimately, while we have to do what we must, to make ends meet and survive, for us, art is not about ownership or names. If our work changes how people think, or how they relate to the world, that's enough.

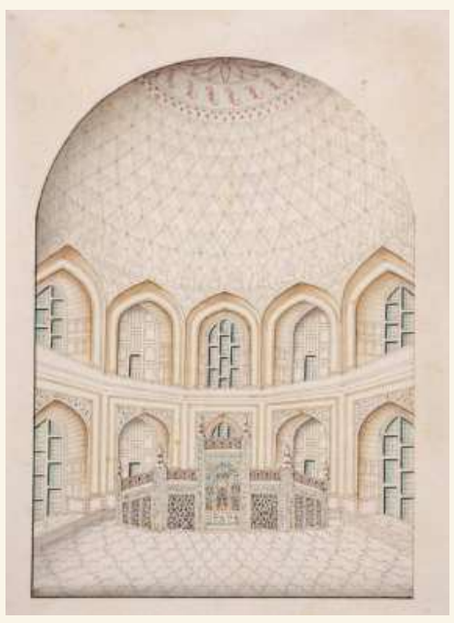
Q: *The cyclical idea that technology can return us to something ancient feels particularly resonant in India. Before we close, what would you like to say to audiences here?*
A: I'll tell you one small story. In 1996 or 1997, I was travelling in India, as a university student, living like a backpacker. Every morning, I'd drink juice from a fruit-seller in the market. One morning, I asked for apple juice. He smiled and gave me mango juice instead. I told him again, "No, I want apple juice." He nodded, said he understood and handed me another mango juice. I was confused but drank it anyway. It was sweet, fresh, and perfect. Later I realised, he wasn't ignoring me. He understood that the best fruit that morning was mango. He wanted to give me the best thing he could. That moment changed how I think about care, misunderstandings, friendship, and maybe even how I make art.

Takashi Kudo will be in conversation with Prateek Raja, director of Experimenter, as part of the third edition of Asia Society India Centre's Trailblazers series on November 9, at IF.BE, Mumbai.

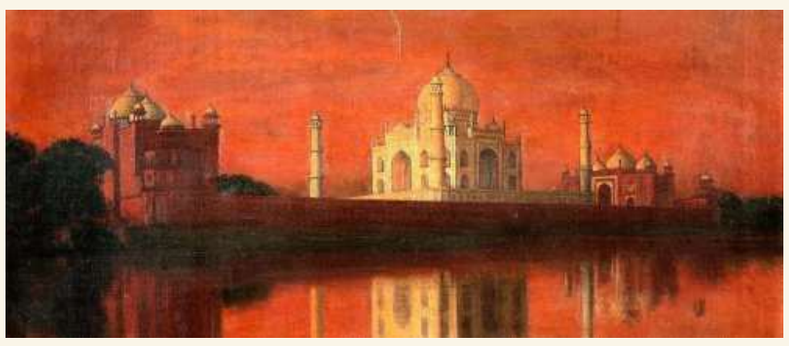
The interviewer specialises in reporting on art, design and architecture.

Amid historical revisionism and heritage politics, DAG's new exhibition offers a fresh perspective on this famous monument

The Taj Mahal speaks for itself



Tales from the tomb (Clockwise from left) *Interior of the Taj Mahal* (Company School); *The Taj Mahal by the Moonlight* by Hugo Vilfred Pedersen; Untitled (Taj Mahal from the River Jumna) by S. Bagchi; *The Passing of Shahjahan* by Abanindranath Tagore; and Untitled (The Last Days of Shah Jahan). (DAG)



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The first unobstructed view of the Taj Mahal from the Darwaza-i-Rauza (grand entranceway) is one of the most recognised images from India. However, the image would have looked strikingly different had Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's original vision endured.

The manicured lawns of today that follow the Char Bagh design had in the original layout featured abundant fruit trees and flowering beds to create a lush garden based on the Quranic vision of paradise. It was Lord Curzon who, during his tenure as Viceroy of India, got the trees cut to cater to more European sensibilities.

While you can still read about the Mughal emperor's paradisiacal garden in textual accounts from that period, DAG has put together a visual narrative – through over 200 photographs, paintings and postcards spanning from the 18th to mid-20th century. Curated by historian Rana Safvi, the collection of Company School paintings alongside works by foreign and modern Indian artists takes viewers through the Taj Mahal and its complex over the years.

Titled *The Mute Eloquence of the Taj Mahal*, it tells the story of the mausoleum by sometimes zooming into the language of the flowers expressed through the beautiful pietra dura inlay work on the cenotaph or taking a macro view of how the Taj cast its shadow over Agra. The exhibition positions the Taj as 'speaking' to the visitors, offering them an immersive look at its stunning architecture, its history of imperial ambition, and its enduring love story – all while staying a mute sentinel.

Design speak

Safvi says she took a cue from Shah Jahan's court chronicler Abdul Hamid Lahori, who spoke of the 'mute eloquence' of what he called the 'Rauza-i Munawwara' (the illumined tomb), to curate the show. She shows how the tomb's design and details, such as the careful selection of quotations from the *Quran* and the decorative flowers that adorn it, like the reverse tulip used to depict gloom, tell us of the beliefs and aspirations of the people who built the 7th Wonder of the World.

Having studied the Taj Mahal as a student, it was when Safvi was studying Sufism (and learning Shah Jahan had been trained as a Sufi, which gives immense importance to life after death) that she once more started reading and researching it.

"The Taj Mahal's design is based on the theme of morality, resurrection and divine harmony of the Islamic vision of *jannat* [paradise]. Shah Jahan, who at that time controlled almost a quarter of the world's GDP, set about to build a veritable 'paradise on earth' as a resting place for Mumtaz Mahal," she says, explaining that the exhibition takes one through the monument's conception, construction, and evolution (as envisioned by the emperor), to the Taj that we know today as a symbol of romance.

Debunking *The Taj Story*

Incidentally, the exhibition coincides with the release of *The Taj Story*. The film stars Paresh Rawal, and draws on writer P.N. Oak's book that makes an argument that the tomb was originally a Shiva temple. "Taj Mahal is not a symbol of love but a symbol of atrocity and genocide," goes a line in the film, and it has sparked discussions on the monument – its Hindu motifs, such as the *kalash*, and the PILs filed in the Allahabad High Court on the 22 rooms that remain out of public view in the basement of the monument – despite the ASI releasing photographs in 2022 debunking claims.

At a time of historical revisionism and heritage politics, when chapters on Mughal history are being deleted from some NCERT textbooks, cities are being renamed to "restore" their ancient identity, and even the Taj has become contested territory, the exhibition is a form of public scholarship. "My style is never to contradict or fight with anybody. I just state facts," says Safvi, commenting on the film and the controversy surrounding it. "The court poets of the Mughals were very meticulous about record keeping and their works contain detailed descriptions of the Taj Mahal, the land it sits on, and why the particular site was chosen." She adds that the mausoleum is a culmination of Indo-Islamic architecture and, therefore, features like the *kalash* are a part of its design.

So, while the 400-year-old monument remains a mute narrator and spectator, perhaps we should look at the exhibition and make up our own minds.

The Mute Eloquence of the Taj Mahal is on at DAG till December 6.